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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/07/2030
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PGOV](#) [UNHCR](#) [TU](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRAN/REFUGEES: EBRAHIM SHARIFI'S U.S.
RESETTLEMENT

REF: 09 ANKARA 1370

Classified By: DPO Win Dayton; Reason 1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ebrahim Sharifi, an Iranian opposition supporter whose testimony to Iran's parliament that security forces raped him in prison (and subsequent interviews with international media outlets) made him a target for regime death threats, and who had been a refugee in Turkey since September, departed Istanbul for onward resettlement in the U.S. on January 6. He told us January 5 he would be willing talk to USG officials about his experiences, and said he would consider further press interviews if it would keep public attention on the plight both of detained opposition members in Iran and on Iranians seeking political asylum in the west. Sharifi described how an IRGC General, a friend of his father's, had offered to guarantee his safety in Turkey if he refrained from discussing his case with reporters or foreign diplomats, which he declined. After that he received almost constant threats, though he was never physically harmed. Sharifi also claimed he was contacted in Turkey by Los Angeles-based friends of Reza Pahlavi (the deposed Shah of Iran's son), offering him USD 15,000 to "join their cause", as well as by Mujahedin-e Khalk members seeking his endorsement, but he also declined. Regarding political developments in Iran, Sharifi assessed that the regime was shocked by the scope of opposition to the election results, and that the IRGC is firmly in charge of decision-making on how to handle the opposition. Since these officials represent "the most extreme five percent" of Iran's population and are driven by an ideology that allows no room for compromise, Sharifi predicted further regime repression. But he also asserted that with each new repressive step the Green Movement's public support expands. He said the one western policy option the regime fears most is not sanctions, but international recognition and legitimization of the Green Movement.

¶2. (C) Summary continued: Sharifi was grateful for USG help, acknowledging that his expedited resettlement would not have been possible without State Department support. He seemed pained by the fact that his circumstances allowed him faster resettlement than most of the remaining Iranian political refugees still in Turkey, and regretful that he did not stay behind in Iran out of solidarity with friends in prison or marching in the streets. After acclimating to life in the U.S., he plans to devote himself to supporting democracy activists in Iran, as well as Iranian refugees in Turkey. End Summary

¶3. (C) As first reported in reftel, Ebrahim Sharifi is a young, politically active, reformist-oriented student who supported an opposition candidate (former Majlis Speaker Mehdi Karroubi) in Iran's June Presidential elections. Like hundreds of thousands of his contemporaries he subsequently

marched in protest of what the opposition saw as a massively fraudulent result. Like thousands of his contemporaries, he was arrested during one of the demonstrations and jailed. Like a small number of detainees, Sharifi claims to have been tortured and raped while in prison because of his political views. After being released, he agreed to Karroubi's request that he testify about his mistreatment by prison security official in front of a Majles investigating committee. The Majles committee, however, dismissed his claims. He and his family soon became targets of harassment and threats, so he decided to escape Iran to Turkey on August 23, with his parents providing him funds to bribe his way over the border.

¶4. (C) Sharifi registered with the UNHCR in Turkey on September 1, and established contact with ConGen Istanbul's NEA Iran Watcher on September 16 (with help of IRPO Dubai and a US-based NGO, the "International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran"). Embassy Ankara met with him on September 17 (reftel), reporting his account of the torture. Sharifi stayed with friends in Ankara while awaiting refugee acceptance and resettlement. During his first few weeks in Ankara, he claims he was frequently followed, and several times was confronted by unknown people cursing at him in Farsi.

¶5. (C) Sharifi claims that around this time, his family informed him that a friend of his father's, reportedly a General with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), told his father that what happened to Sharifi in prison was a mistake and that if Sharifi kept his mouth shut and refrained from speaking to the press or foreign diplomats about it, he would not be a target. Sharifi's response was to reach out

to the New York Times, CNN, the UK Guardian, and several other western media outlets to tell his story. (Comment: The New York Times wrote about Sharifi on September 24, 2009, while CNN reported on his experiences on October 2, 2009.) He told us that his decision to go public with his ordeal in prison "guaranteed never being able to go back to Iran" and also, he reasoned, provided him a higher degree of protection, assuming that the Turkish government would not allow Iran to harm a registered refugee in Turkey, especially such a high-profile, politically sensitive one.

¶6. (C) Given the credible threats against Sharifi, the State Department, working through PRM's regional refugee coordinator in Amman, informed the UNHCR office in early October 2009 that the USG would be willing to consider Sharifi for acceptance into the US refugee resettlement program. UNHCR agreed to expedite Sharifi's refugee status determination, interviewing him on October 9, 2009, with a follow-up interview on October 26, when they accepted his refugee status and assigned him conditionally to onward resettlement to the U.S. UNHCR also agreed to the Department's request to expedite Sharifi's onward resettlement processing, bumping him up to the top of the queue, which resulted in Sharifi getting interviewed by visiting DHS representatives in Istanbul on October 30. On November 17, his SAO check was approved and PRM notified UNHCR formally that the U.S. would accept Sharifi as soon as possible for onward resettlement.

Constant Fear -----

¶7. (C) Even with active USG attention and help on his case, Sharifi described weeks of constantly living in fear, especially around the time of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's November 8-9, 2009, visit to Turkey. Sharifi claimed that his email account was hacked, with emails from his account being sent to his friends and family that he had not written, and emails from friends that he knew were in jail telling him that he was going to be killed. In late November, he awoke to find two men staring in the first floor window of his living room, and received an email the next day saying that "now you see what we are capable of doing." Based on those claims, PRM reps requested that UNHCR work with Turkish

police to ensure his security, including his move to a series of different hotels in Ankara.

Working with Other refugees but avoiding political work

¶8. (C) Sharifi made contacts with several other Iranians refugees in Turkey who had faced similar conditions in prison, such as torture and rape, including Maryam Sabri and Ebrahim Mehtari, and two photographers for Fars News -- Hossein Salmanzadeh and Javad Moghimi -- who fled Iran after the regime learned that they had provided news photos and coverage of the anti-regime demonstrations to Time Magazine and other western outlets. He says he gave them money to help pay for food, shelter, and the Turkish Government's monthly residency fee it charges refugees, as well as advising them how to interacting with UNHCR (especially with regard to the December 12 physical attack on Sabri by unknown assailants in Kayseri) and how to contact the U.S. Embassy in Ankara and US Consulate General in Istanbul. (Comment: Of those four refugees, both Sabri and Mehtari have made contact with Mission Turkey; Ankara CONS advised both on the importance of registering with UNHCR. We are currently working with UNHCR to expedite Sabri's case, given the continued threats being made against her. End comment.)

¶9. (C) However, except for Sharifi's contacts with the US-based "International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran", he declined the requests of several opposition groups to enlist his support, including from Los Angeles-based friends of Reza Pahlavi, the son of former Shah of Iran Mohamed Reza Pahlavi. He claims they offered him USD 15,000 to enlist his political support, an offer he declined. He also claimed that representatives of the Mujaheddin-e Khalk (MEK) sent messages to him that the MEK would welcome his membership, another offer he declined. He said that while he continues to support Mehdi Karrubi and the Green Movement, he was worried that engaging in overt anti-regime political activity in Turkey could out his refugee status at risk.

A few Bumps

¶10. (C) Despite the effective coordination between the USG and UNHCR resulting in a speedy approval process for his onward resettlement, Sharifi faced several administrative bumps in the process. First, a cousin in California who Sharifi thought would serve as his sponsor declined to do so, leaving Sharifi to be resettled more arbitrarily to a U.S. location (in his case, Fort Worth, Texas) without a support network of friends or relatives. In addition, once his formal USG acceptance had been reported to UNHCR, they had anticipated that Turkish authorities would allow his onward resettlement within two weeks and thus booked Sharifi on a December 10 flight, assuming that in the intervening time Turkish authorities would assign him to a "satellite city" for an obligatory minimum two-week stay there. In this case, however, Turkish authorities did not assign Sharifi to a satellite city, Kayseri, until December 14. Once established in Kayseri, Sharifi claims local police told him they had lost his file and that he would need to stay in Kayseri for many months. On December 31, however, UNHCR informed him that his exit permission had been granted, and that he would depart from Istanbul to the United States on January 6.

What's Happening In Iran

¶11. (C) Asked his view of the near-term future of the Iranian regime and the opposition Green Movement, Sharifi assessed that the regime was shocked by the size and scope of opposition to the election results, and that decision-making on how to handle the opposition is now firmly in the hands of IRGC hardliners. These officials represent "the most extreme five percent" of Iran's population and are driven by an ideology that allows no room for compromise or compassion

towards perceived enemies. As a result, Sharifi predicted further regime repression against the Green Movement, especially as the movement will likely take to streets again later this month on the 40th day after Grand Ayatollah Montazeri's death (January 29), in early February to mourn the protesters killed by security forces on Ashura, and on February 11 to commemorate Iran's "Victory of the Revolution" day. Sharifi predicted that security forces will be willing to kill up to dozens of marchers at a time, and lock up thousands more. But he also asserted that with each new repressive step and each increase in violence, the Green Movement's public support expands commensurate with the public's shock and anger at the violence against the demonstrators.

¶12. (C) Sanctions will not hurt the entrenched IRGC and regime leadership who control large sectors of the black market economy, Sharifi assessed. Petrol sanctions, for example, would probably enrich key IRGC Generals who control black market smuggling routes, while making the daily lives of Iranian citizens even more difficult. Sharifi could not say whether the Iranian public in that case would blame the regime first, or the west.

¶13. (C) Sharifi offered that the one western/USG policy option that the regime fears most is not sanctions, but international recognition and legitimization of the Green Movement. If President Obama were to start referring in his speeches to Karrubi and Mousavi "by name, as men of great political courage", it would be a shot in the arm to the Green Movement's rank and file. Even more helpful (though unrealistic, as Sharifi acknowledged) would be a USG announcement that Washington has reviewed the results of the June election and does not accept the results as announced by the Interior Ministry. An effort to challenge the election results, and thus delegitimize the regime's ever-weaker claims to a public mandate -- especially coming from a globally admired Nobel Peace Prize laureate -- would send shock waves through the regime establishment, Sharifi argued. Moreover, since the engagement track has been rejected by Iran, there is no longer any practical harm to the U.S. to reject the regime's claims that it represents Iran's people. "In June a slight majority of the people voted against Ahmadinejad. Now, after the violence, it is a much bigger majority and they want much bigger changes. The United States should be on their side.

Comments

¶14. (C) The process of expediting Sharifi's refugee case and facilitating his speedy onward resettlement to the United States, though it had some bumps, ultimately worked well. Sharifi was grateful for USG help, acknowledging that his

expedited departure for the U.S. would not have been possible without the State Department's cooperation and support. He seemed pained by the fact that his especially difficult circumstances allowed him faster resettlement than most of the remaining hundreds of Iranian political refugees still in Turkey, but also regretful that he did not stay behind in Iran out of solidarity with his friends in prison or marching in the streets.

¶15. (C) After acclimating to life in the U.S., he said he will devote himself to supporting democracy activists in Iran, as well as Iranian refugees in Turkey, hoping his example can help give them courage not to give up. He also told us he would be willing talk to USG officials about his experiences in Iran and Turkey, and said he would consider further press interviews if such coverage will help keep public attention on the plight both of detained opposition members in Iran and on Iranian political refugees seeking asylum in the west.

¶16. (C) Meanwhile, we will continue to try to identify and engage other at-risk, vulnerable, politically significant refugees in Turkey. As appropriate, with Department

concurrence and within PRM and UNHCR resource constraints, we will also continue to consult closely with the Department to consider whether the template successfully used in Sharifi's might contribute, in the most sensitive cases, to expediting the onward resettlement. End comment.

WIENER